



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

LAW AND RITUAL IN THE PSALMS

J. M. POWIS SMITH
University of Chicago

ABSTRACT

The Psalter, being a hymnbook, is representative of the thought and feeling of the common people of Judaism. The legal priestly elements were the permanent features of Judaism; prophecy was transitory. The Psalter developed under strongly Babylonian influence amid a rich expression of ritualistic religion and was profoundly affected thereby. The Psalms show that the people who wrote and sang them loved the law and the temple ritual. The Psalms were written in large part for use in connection with sacrifice; they were a rhythmization of ritual. This love for ritual did not exclude genuine piety, but intensified it. It is the mystical and spiritual tone of the Psalms that commends them to modern minds. The original makers and singers of these songs cannot have had a merely materialistic or formal type of religion.

It is a common charge that the Judaism of the postexilic age was a mechanical, formal, and unspiritual type of religion. It is supposed that true religion died with the prophets and was buried with them, not to come to life again till the appearance of John the Baptist and Jesus. The picture of the Pharisees presented in the Gospels is carried back through the centuries and made to do service as a description of postexilic religion. Critical scholarship, however, has discovered the injustice of this interpretation and has sought to reinstate early Judaism in its proper place. From this point of view the present article proceeds.

The Psalter is appropriately called "The Hymn Book of the Second Temple." This covers the fact that most of the Psalms were written in exilic and postexilic times and the further fact that they were sung by the choirs of the temple for the edification of the worshiping multitudes. It is a well-known fact that hymn books are not available as instruments of publicity for new ideas. They must meet the demands of the masses who use them. We do not find in them our best poetry, our best thought, nor our purest ethics as a rule.

The hymn book rather presents the point of view of the average man than that of the genius or the saint. The Psalter was not exempt from this requirement and as a matter of fact when compared in any one of these aspects with certain other portions of the Old Testament it must take second place. The problem of suffering is thought out far more thoroughly in Job than in the Psalter. The idea of a worthwhile life after death finds no sure expression in the Psalter. These spheres of thought were too new and unfamiliar to find place in this book of hymns. Consequently when we read the Psalms we are following the mind of the masses, or at least of the great middle class, and not that of the pioneers of religion and ethics.¹ The ritual of a religion is always one of its most conservative elements and law is never radical. The Psalter was a part of the ritual and makes its attitude to law indisputably clear. Hence in studying its testimony as to the religious value of law and ritual, we shall be getting close to the heart of the religion of the psalmists.

The prophets have captured the imagination and interest of modern interpreters of the Old Testament. Indeed, one of the greatest achievements of modern historical interpretation is the fact that it has brought out the significance and value of prophecy in such a way as to have made the prophet the religious hero of the Hebrew people. This is a recognition of his real worth that has been long due the prophet. But, while granting the prophet his full rights and extending to him our heart-felt gratitude for his contribution to human welfare, we must not make the mistake of minimizing the work or value of other religious agencies in Israel. After all, prophecy was only a temporary phenomenon in Hebrew life. The whole period covered by the prophetic movement was but about six hundred years, and the classical and creative portion of that period includes only about three hundred years. The priest, however, with his law and ceremonial,

¹ See chapter i of my forthcoming *Religion of the Psalms*.

was on the stage of life from the very beginning to the very end. He preceded the prophet and he outlived him. Prophecy was a transient ebullition of the religious spirit in Israel; law and ritual were a permanent and steady current in that life. Not only so, but the appeal of the prophet found its effective response only in the hearts and minds of a comparatively small number of people, the idealists of the day; the work of the priest was familiar to and appreciated by the masses of the nation as a whole. The priest with his ritual spoke a language that was "understood of the people." Furthermore, the preservation of the religious and ethical values wrought out in Hebrew experience, whether they were the product of priest or prophet, was due in the last resort to the preservative and solidifying labors of the priest and his law. It was in defense of the right to live according to the law that the Maccabean patriots fought and died. It was loyalty to the law and its institutions that held Judaism together and kept it from surrendering to either the blandishments or the threats of paganism.

As prophecy diminished in vitality and finally was transformed into apocalypticism, law and ritual took on new life and came into a controlling place in the religious thought and daily routine of Judaism. This expansion, intensification, and purification of the legal and ritual life began among the Babylonian exiles and to the last found its chief supporters and promoters in the Babylonian community. Ezekiel's idealistic and imaginary code (Ezekiel, chaps. 40-48) certainly was inspired by the Babylonian environment and experience of his people, and it is probable that the Holiness Code (Leviticus, chaps. 17-26, etc.) is a Babylonian revision of older legislation. The Jewish tradition itself connects the later stage of the legal development represented by Ezra's law with the Babylonian Jews. This increased activity in the realm of law and ritual was due to two main influences. On the one hand, the experiences of exile bit deeply into the soul

of Israel. The only possible religious explanation that the exiles could understand was that Yahweh was angry with them for their sins. Hence it was inevitable that they should try to propitiate him and make their life conform to his will. The revision of the ritual and the law in such a way as to embody in them much of the teaching of the great prophets was one of these means of propitiation or atonement. The plan of it all was to guard every avenue of approach to Jewish life and the expressions of that life in such a way as to ward off the entrance of sin into the community. If the people of Yahweh could but be kept from evil, the blessing of prosperity and restoration must assuredly rest upon them. Hence the imposition upon themselves of a mass of detailed legislation that to less zealous people would have been crushing. There is no more pathetic movement in history than this effort of Judaism to commend itself to its God by its works. On the other hand, the Jews in Babylonia were in constant contact with the rituals of the various Babylonian temples. These temples had at their disposal a body of priests and a fund of wealth that was wholly beyond the reach of the poverty-stricken peasants of hilly Judah. Nevertheless, the exiles learned much from it and were inspired to greater effort by the sight of it. As suggestive of the extent of Babylonian influence upon Hebrew ritual, we may cite two facts out of the abundance. We read in Ezek. 8:14 that the women of Jerusalem in his day were in the habit of "weeping for Tammuz." This is evidence that the old Sumero-Babylonian festival of Tammuz had found recognition in Israel, at least in the religious life of the populace. Again, the Babylonian New Year's festival was closely copied by the Jews. Speaking of this feast, Professor Jastrow says,

The festival lasted for eleven days, and on the concluding day, as it would appear, the fates decreed by the gods were definitely sealed. A special interest attaches to this New Year's festival, because it served as the pattern for both the New Year and the Day of Atonement of

the Jews. The popular Jewish tradition represents God as sitting in judgment during the first ten days of the year, surrounded by his court of angels, who inscribe in the book of fate the names of all persons with what is to be their destiny for the coming year. To this day the New Year's greeting among Jews is, "May you be inscribed for a good year." The nine days intervening between the New Year's Day and the Day of Atonement are days of probation, but at the close of the tenth day the book of fate for the year is sealed, and the wish of this day therefore is, "May you be sealed for a good year."¹

The Jewish Psalter was developing amidst all this Babylonian influence, not merely in the days of the Exile proper, but for long afterward. Indeed it is altogether probable that Babylonian hymnology, which was extensively developed and was not in its higher reaches wholly unworthy of comparison with the best Hebrew psalms, was not without its direct influence upon the origin and growth of the Hebrew Psalter. Under these circumstances it is clear that the Jewish interest in law and ritual was greatly stimulated and influenced by Babylonian institutions and practices. The Psalter cannot have escaped this influence and having arisen in a ritualistic and legalistic age must reflect the cultural and spiritual forces that played upon the minds and hearts of its authors.

When we turn to the reading of the Psalms in order to discover their attitude toward law and ritual, our attention is arrested by the fact that there is apparently little of that sort of thing present. By actual count, there are less than twenty psalms that concern themselves directly with those subjects, and in some of these the reference is confined to a verse or two and is little more than incidental.² Not only so, but in some of the psalms, ritual in particular is either directly

¹ M. Jastrow, *Aspects of Religious Belief and Practice in Babylonia and Assyria* (1911), pp. 341 f.

² Of course, it will be noted that this may be due to the lyrical character of the poetry which concerns itself rather with spirit and sentiment than with concrete facts and institutions. The hymnals of the Catholic and Anglican churches are not marked by excessive reference to ritual.

or indirectly made apparently subordinate to ethical and spiritual interests. For example, Ps. 24:3-5:

Who shall go up into the hill of Yahweh?
And who shall stand in His holy place?
He that has clean hands and a pure heart;
Who has not taken My name in vain,
And has not sworn deceitfully.
He shall receive a blessing from Yahweh,
And vindication from the God of his salvation.

And again, Ps. 51:16, 17:

For thou delightest not in sacrifice, else would I give it;
Thou hast no pleasure in burnt-offering.
The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit;
A broken and a contrite heart, O God, Thou wilt not despise.

Such utterances as these show the influence upon the psalmists of the prophets' attitude toward ritual and their interpretation of religion. But the priest and the lawmaker are likewise represented in the Psalms. Some of the psalms reflect an ardent love for the law and its ritual. Hear the psalmist utter his appreciation of the temple and its worship in Ps. 122:

I was glad when they said to me,
"Let us go up to the house of Yahweh."
Our feet are standing
In thy gates, O Jerusalem,
Jerusalem that is built like a city
Which is compact together,
Whither the tribes go up,
The tribes of Yah,
A testimony for Israel,
To praise the name of Yahweh.
For there are set thrones of judgment,
The thrones of the house of David.
Send greetings to Jerusalem.
May they prosper that love thee.
Peace be within thy rampart,

And prosperity within thy palaces.
For the sake of my brethren and my friends,
I will say, Peace be unto thee!
For the sake of the house of Yahweh, our God,
I will seek thy good.

But the outstanding effort in commendation and praise of the law is the long 119th Psalm. In almost every one of its 176 verses some word connoting the law appears. One section will be sufficient to illustrate its spirit and attitude:

Oh, how I love Thy law!
It is my meditation all the day.
Thy commandment makes me wiser than my foes,
For it is forever mine.
I am wiser than all my teachers,
For Thy testimony is my meditation.
I have better understanding than the elders,
For I have kept Thy precepts.
I have restrained my feet from every wicked way,
That I might observe Thy word.
From Thy judgments I have not strayed,
For Thou hast taught me.
How sweet to my palate are Thy words,
Yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth.
From Thy precepts I get discernment;
Therefore I hate every false way [119:97-104].

If such words as these mean anything, it is that the writers of such psalms as these and the people who treasured such utterances did not find the requirements of the law and its ritual an intolerable burden. It was not to their minds a necessary means to a more desirable and important end. It was distinctly an end in itself that was of incommensurable value. These men delighted in the law of Yahweh; they sought to keep it with the whole heart; they rejoiced in the testimonies of Yahweh "as much as in all riches."

Even though princes sit and talk to me,
Thy servant doth meditate in Thy statutes.

In view of the devotion to the law and ritual so strongly manifested in a few psalms, we are justified in entertaining an expectation that further search will discover other evidence of legalistic or ritualistic interest in the Psalter. A very illuminating type of evidence is that furnished by the vocabulary and phraseology of the Psalms. It is very significant that much of this reveals the closest familiarity with the ritualistic usage. The language of the Psalter is full of terminology derived from the law and the temple ceremony. The Psalms are saturated with consciousness of the ritual and unconsciously reflect a sincere devotion to the law and all its requirements. The mind of the psalmist is constantly turning toward Jerusalem and his longing is ever for the holy temple. The terms "Zion," "Jerusalem," "holy mountain," and "city of God" occur about sixty times in the Psalter, and references to the temple, sanctuary, house of God, and the like, appear an equal number of times. When to these allusions there are added the many occurrences of "law," "statute," "ordinances," "sacrifices," "congregation," "drink-offering," "incense," "vows," "fasting," "musical instruments," "clean," "altar," "priest," "anointing oil," and the like, it becomes certain that the writers of the Psalms lived and moved and had their being in a ritualistic environment to which they responded with their whole soul. They speak of these things not as indifferent or hostile observers, but rather as enthusiastic and devoted participants.

The relation of the Psalter to the ritual was closer even than may be inferred from the fact that the psalmists were devoted adherents and admirers of the temple and its ritual. In II Chron. 29:25 ff. we find a narrative regarding certain sacrifices offered by King Hezekiah which is, in any case, adequate testimony as to the nature of the sacrificial worship in the chronicler's own day, i.e., about the third century, B.C. That narrative is so informing regarding the use of the Psalms in the temple ritual that we give it in full:

And he [i.e. Hezekiah] set the Levites in the house of Yahweh with cymbals, with psalteries, and with harps, according to the commandment of David, and of Gad the King's seer, and of Nathan the prophet, for through Yahweh was the commandment through his prophets. And the Levites stood with the instruments of David, and the priests with the trumpets. And Hezekiah commanded to offer the burnt-offering upon the altar. And when the burnt-offering began, the song of Yahweh began also, and the trumpets, together with the instruments of David, King of Israel. And all the congregation worshipped, and the singers sang, and the trumpeters sounded; all this until the burnt-offering was finished. And when they had made an end of offering, the King and all that were present with him bowed down and worshipped. Moreover Hezekiah the King and the princes commanded the Levites to sing praises to Yahweh with the words of David, and of Asaph the seer. And they sang praises with gladness, and they bowed their heads and worshipped.

This passage shows that the singing of the Psalms to the accompaniment of instrumental music was carried on simultaneously with the offering of the sacrifices.¹

This was a musical rhythmization of the acts of the ritual, even as the musical parts of the mass in the Roman Catholic ritual serve to rhythmize the ritualistic acts. This intimate relation of the Psalms to the ritual is reflected in the text of some of them. In Ps. 26:6, 7 we read:

I will wash my hands in innocency,
And will encompass Thine altar, O Yahweh,
That I may publish with the voice of thanksgiving,
And recount all Thy wondrous works.

This plainly associates the singing of Yahweh's praises with the ceremonies at the altar. In Ps. 27:6 the poet associates sacrifice with music:

I will offer in His tabernacle sacrifices with trumpet sound,
I will sing, and praise Yahweh in song.

¹ The Mishna, *Tamid*, VII, 3, likewise tells us that the libation of wine at the altar was accompanied by music and the Songs of the Levites.

The law itself calls for a musical accompaniment to the act of sacrifice. Witness Num. 10:10:

Also in the day of your gladness, and in your appointed seasons, and in your new moons, ye shall blow with trumpets over your burnt-offerings, and over the sacrifices of your peace-offerings; and they shall be to you for a memorial before your God.

Again in Ps. 43:4 the same association of ideas appears:

Then will I go unto the altar of God,
And praise Thee upon the harp.

Also in Ps. 107:22:

Offer the sacrifices of thanksgiving,
And declare His works with song.

The poet of Ps. 68:24 ff. describes the processions of singers and worshipers in the temple:

They saw Thy goings, O God,
The goings of my God, my King, in the sanctuary.
Before went the singers; behind, players on stringed instruments,
In the midst of damsels playing upon timbrels.
Bless ye God in full assemblies,
Even Yahweh, ye that are from the fountain of Israel.

Possibly Ps. 118:27 refers to similar processional features of the worship:

Deck the festal procession with branches,
Even to the horns of the altar.¹

Such facts as these show that the original use of the Psalms was largely in the interests of ritual and that they are to be thought of as to a great extent lyrical interpretations of the acts of worship. The evidence of the superscriptions, later additions though they are, is to the effect that the Psalms were sung to musical accompaniments, and some of them are

¹ The meaning of this verse is very obscure. The English Versions render, "Bind the sacrifice with cords, etc." But this is contrary to all known practice. The rendering above follows closely that of the new Jewish translation. The verb regularly means "bind," but that seems wholly unfitting here.

definitely assigned to ceremonial functions (e.g., Ps. 30:1; 92:1) or are ascribed to priestly authors, to-wit, the sons of Korah and Asaph. The text of the Psalms themselves makes references to the use of music and musical instruments in the worship of Yahweh (Pss. 33:2; 92:4; 144:9). The Psalter was the expression of the devotional spirit of all the people. But as we have noted the worship of the common people in Judah always was inseparably associated with forms and ceremonies. Indeed, even today a ceremonial appeals powerfully to the masses of the people and exercises an influence in the direction of inspiring an attitude of worship that the ordinary bare and cold worship of Protestant churches fails to call forth even with the aid of the most eloquent preaching. It is the priest rather than the prophet that keeps in touch with the heart of the public.

The practice of ritual is, of course, not inconsistent with nor hostile to the development of a genuinely spiritual piety. If ritual be observed with devout mind and with whole heart it stimulates and intensifies piety; but if regarded as mere form, it degenerates into mechanism and kills all true piety. The beauty of the religion of the Psalms lies in the combination of a sincere and enthusiastic attitude toward ritual with a true sense of ethical values and spiritual ideals. Such a genuinely spiritual song as Pss. 42 and 43 gives expression to the longing of the poet's soul in the familiar words:

As the hart panteth after the water brooks,
So panteth my soul after Thee, O God.
My soul thirsteth for God, for the living God:
When shall I come and see the face of God?

And yet this intensely spiritual sentiment is coupled with a longing for the temple and its ritual:

O send out Thy light and Thy truth, let them lead me;
Let them bring me unto Thy holy hill, and to Thy dwelling place;
Then will I go to the altar of God, unto God, my exceeding joy;
And praise Thee upon the harp, O God, my God.

The beautiful Shepherd Psalm can think of no higher joy than that of dwelling "in the house of Yahweh forever." Psalm 15 demands the strictest moral purity as a prerequisite to entrance into and sojourn in the sanctuary.¹

In most of the great spiritual leaders of mankind there has been a marked mystical strain. In relatively modern times it is noteworthy how many genuine "saints" have appeared in highly ritualistic communions. The Roman Catholic church and the Anglican church, particularly in the High Church section, have been distinguished by the number of mystics they have included. Ritual lends itself readily to mystical interpretation and easily becomes a handmaid of mystic communion. It is this mystical element in the religion of the Psalms that renders their appeal so powerful to the spiritual mind.

In estimating the significance of the Psalms for our understanding of Jewish religious life, we must remember not only that the select spirits of postexilic Israel produced most of the Psalter, but also, a fact of perhaps even more significance, the common people of that period appreciated the Psalms and preserved them from falling into innocuous desuetude. We cannot think lightly of a people who treasured such songs as Psalms 90, 91, and 103 and kept them alive by constant use. The Judaism of the Psalms was not a dull, formal, and lifeless ceremony, but an intensely vigorous and profoundly spiritual life.

¹ A Greek inscription at Epidauros likewise requires purity of heart and clean hands of all who enter the temple there. Candidates for initiation into the Eleusinian mysteries were required to be pure of heart and clean of hands before entering the assembly of novitiates. Any not so qualifying were expelled. The Emperor Nero desired admission to the Mysteries but feared to enter the Assembly lest he might be ejected. After this first test as to moral purity, a ritual purification in the sea was required.